

## *Do Women Represent Women? Rethinking the “Critical Mass” Debate*

Descriptive representation by gender improves substantive outcomes for women in every polity for which we have a measure. (Jane Mansbridge, “Quota Problems,” *Politics & Gender* 1 [December 2005]: 622)

Women’s representation by elected women is a major research arena for scholars of women and politics. Comparativists and U.S. politics scholars, as well as feminist theorists, have given extensive attention to the question of whether or not women’s political presence in legislatures is necessary for advancing policies favorable to women. Recent research and theorizing have sought to identify the conditions under which women-friendly policy might be advanced and the explanatory links between women’s parliamentary presence and public policy outcomes. A key potential explanatory model has been partially constructed on the concept of “critical mass”: a threshold number (or percentage) of women in a legislature necessary for transforming the legislative context from one in which women-friendly policy is unlikely to one in which the opportunities for women’s policy success are increased.

If, as Mansbridge asserts, women’s descriptive representation improves women’s substantive representation, do increasing numbers of women in legislatures result in more and better public policy for women? Is there a critical mass of elected women that, once achieved, accelerates their policy-making opportunities? If so, what mechanisms explain such a transformation? Should activist women target a specific critical mass as a political strategy for advancing favorable legislation? The following four critical essays address these questions, taking in their different ways a critical perspective on the concept of critical mass.

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## **Numbers and Beyond: The Relevance of Critical Mass in Gender Research**

*Sandra Grey, Victoria University*

Political scientists concerned with gender relations have long been interested in the numbers of women in national legislatures. Women make up slightly more than 50% of the world's population, yet average only 16% of the world's elected political posts. This has led to calls for action that would increase the number of women in legislatures based both on arguments of justice and on claims that an increase will substantively change decision-making processes and outcomes. Part of the debate about substantive changes in political decision making has centered on whether women in a legislature must reach a "critical mass" in order to bring about change in the political arena. The term *critical mass* is frequently used by politicians, the media, and academics, but can it offer insights into the influence of gender on political processes and outcomes? In this essay, I argue that critical mass is only useful if we discard the belief that a single proportion holds the key to all representation needs of women and if we discard notions that numbers alone bring about substantive changes in policy processes and outcomes. I use a longitudinal textual analysis of New Zealand parliamentary debates to begin development of a joint-effect model that can better explain the factors that aid (or hinder) the substantive representation of women.

## The Core Behind Critical Mass Hypotheses

The belief that women politicians will have a substantive effect on political decision making is found within debates about the “politics of presence” (Phillips 1995), of which critical mass research can be seen as one part. In these debates, the messenger as well as the message is seen as important (Catt 2003), and women politicians are seen to be not only “standing as” women but also “acting for” women as a group once elected (Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Pitkin 1967). This assertion is based not on a belief in an essential link between sex and representation but on the way in which women experience the world and how this affects their actions if elected as political representatives. As Melissa Williams (1996, 106) puts it: “The representative who is capable of acting as an advocate for women’s interest must have some understanding of the ways in which the lives of her constituents are shaped by the privilege of men, and the most effective starting-point for that knowledge is the fact of her own experience of exclusion and subordination.” Female politicians themselves have noted the importance of gender identity within the political realm. For example, during parliamentary debates on parental tax credits, New Zealand Member of Parliament (MP) Christine Fletcher noted (“Taxation (Parental Tax Credit) Bill” 1999, 16695) that: “there is a greater number of women in Parliament, and that allows us—as we approach the new millennium—to finally begin to debate some of the issues, which I see as the hard issues.”

The expectation that female politicians will represent women in political debates and decision making is not without problems. As Drude Dahlerup (1988, 279) notes, women as politicians are caught between two conflicting expectations. They have to prove they are just like male politicians and that they will make a difference when elected. Even without this double bind, there are problems if women politicians are seen to represent only “women’s interests” (or perhaps “feminist interests”). The substantive representation of women is further complicated as women are by no means a coherent group and every female legislator will have cross-cutting identity characteristics that affects her worldviews. Despite these concerns, it is important to ascertain whether women have a “voice” or “voices” in the national legislature, whether this voice comes via female legislators, and what role numerical strength plays in enabling politicians to act as and for women.

## Rethinking the Critical Numbers

The concept of critical mass came to the fore in political science after the publication of Dahlerup's 1988 article "From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics." On the basis of the idea that the form of a legislative assembly will shape the process and policies of that body, Dahlerup drew on a 1977 study by Rosabeth Moss Kanter of the interactions in groups composed of people of different cultural categories or statuses. Kanter (1977, 966–67) had presented a typology of four group types in order to investigate the effect of changing group dynamics on organizational culture. From her work, two group types have emerged as the most important in critical mass debates—the *skewed* group, where the minority constituted a maximum of 15% and are "tokens," and the *tilted* group, in which the minority has between 15% and 40% membership and is "becoming strong enough to begin to influence the culture of the group." While Kanter's article is central to the concept of critical mass, her proportions only rarely appear in critical mass inquiries, with Dahlerup's suggestion of 30% as the point of critical mass making it into both political science and into the political imagination of many nations (Childs 2004; Grey 2002; McAllister and Studlar 2002; United Nations Economic and Social Council 2004).

There is little evidence that 30% is a magical cure-all for ensuring the representation of women in national politics; authors (including Dahlerup) have suggested that the most important thing for the substantive representation of women in politics is "critical acts" (Dahlerup 1988; Lovenduski 2001) or "safe spaces" (Childs 2004). I suggest that given there is nothing in Kanter's work to indicate that a single figure is all-important, we need to move to the idea that different *critical masses* may be needed, depending on the outcome sought. Gaining 15% of the seats in a political body may allow female politicians to change the political agenda, but it may take proportions of 40% to have women-friendly policies introduced.

There is one further problem with the use of numbers in researching the substantive impact of women politicians that needs attention before moving on. It is difficult to explore fully whether critical masses are needed to ensure the substantive representation of women, due to the very lack of women in most democratic legislatures. This point can be illustrated by looking to a comparative study of 20 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations carried out by Ian McAllister and Donley Studlar (2002). While I agree with

McAllister and Studlar that more caution is a needed regarding the concept of critical mass, I also note that few of the democracies in their study had anything near 30% women in their legislative ranks, let alone 40%.

Even if we recast the proportions at the heart of critical mass inquiries and allow for different critical masses to be considered as points of take-off, however, it is likely that McAllister and Studlar (2002, 247) are right: The impact of critical mass has been inflated. What existing investigations of critical mass have signaled is that we need to look at developing a clearly articulated joint-effect model that more accurately reflects the factors that aid (or hinder) female politicians looking to act as and for women.

### Rethinking the Critical Mass Expectations

Existing critical mass investigations have tested Dahlerup's hypotheses around changes to the parliamentary culture (Broughton and Zetlin 1996; Grey 2002; Kathlene 1994; Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Thomas 1991); feminization of political agendas and parliamentary debates (Broughton and Palmeri 1999; Freedman 2002; Sawyer 2004; Thomas 1991); changes to legislation (Childs 2004; Thomas 1994); and reactions to women politicians (Kathlene 1994). Few have confirmed a straightforward causal link between female politicians reaching a critical mass and the substantive representation of women. From this body of work four factors seem most important to investigate alongside the role that critical masses of women have in bringing change to political process and outcomes: the position of the female politicians in question; their time in office; both their own and their political party's ideology; and finally, the reactions of, and to, the women politicians.

From the body of critical mass research, there is also an indication that researchers should not look merely for positive impacts occurring as the numbers of women in a legislature increase. Take, for example, Dahlerup's (1988, 283–87) hypothesis that there will be a change in the reactions to women as politicians, both inside and outside legislatures, once their numbers reach a critical mass. The reaction to rising numbers of women in powerful positions may be hostile (see Kathlene, 1994); this could, in turn, impact the behavior of elected women.

New Zealand provides a natural case study from which to begin development of a joint-effect model into the factors behind the substantive

representation of women in politics, for a number of reasons. First, the number of women in the national legislature has been relatively high for nearly a decade, with women occupying around 30% of seats in the House of Representatives since 1996. There have also been relatively high proportions of women in three successive government executives (in 1999, women held seven of the 20 cabinet positions; in 2002, six out of 20; and in 2005, five out of 20—the number of women in the cabinet includes Prime Minister Helen Clark). The New Zealand case also allows researchers to look at whether the rules of the game influence group representation, due to the change in electoral systems in 1996 from first-past-the-post (FPP) to mixed-member-proportional (MMP) representation.

To begin development of a joint-effect model, I draw on research that evaluates the substantive impact of New Zealand women politicians since 1970 through textual analysis of parliamentary debates on three topics: child care, pay equity, and parental leave. These issues were chosen because empirical research has shown that gender differences in politics are more obvious on women's issues or issues to do with women's autonomy (Lovenduski and Norris 2003; Norris 1993; Reingold 1992). The textual analysis allowed evaluation of occasions during political debates when women politicians stated that they were acting as or for women.

A long time frame for research into the substantive representation of women is necessary, despite a common misconception within critical mass inquiries that there will be an *immediate* takeoff into a new situation once women reach a critical mass. What the critical mass hypothesis calls for is detection of an irreversible takeoff into a new situation. The New Zealand case highlights that where human interactions are concerned, time may be a crucial factor in gaining lasting change. Many women-friendly policies in New Zealand were passed almost 20 years after women first occupied 15% of the seats in the national legislature.

Textual analysis of parliamentary debates has limitations. Actors in Westminster-style parliaments are bound by standing orders (written rules) and by unwritten conventions. In addition, much of the activity of MPs is performed outside the debating chamber, in parliamentary committees, in their geographical constituencies, and in the community. Nonetheless, textual analysis provides a manageable way to undertake analysis across a long time frame, and provides a window into the actual behavior of politicians. Numerous studies have used survey results to show that female MPs hold substantially different views than their male colleagues, and infer that this will lead to different political behavior. While it is important to discuss politicians' motivations, surveys gauge the subject-

tive attitudes of MPs rather than objective behavior within the bounds of legislative assemblies. As Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris (2003, 97) note in their study of the politics of presence in Great Britain: “without independent verification, self-reported claims expressed during interviews that women politicians will prioritise women’s interest and concerns more than men cannot be accepted at face value, any more than we would accept without demonstrable evidence any claims that Labour MPs speak for and defend the interest of the poor, or that Conservative MPs represent the business community.” These concerns are validated by the work of Beth Reingold (2000), who found that legislative behavior of women politicians often did not match their expressed interest in women’s issues. Textual analysis of parliamentary debates allows for independent verification of women politicians’ behavior in parliamentary debates, even if these actions are constrained by the institutional rules of the legislature.

Methodologically, another issue arises from using textual analysis as the tool of inquiry, given that the very way issues are categorized in political debates affects how they are discussed and by whom. For example, in New Zealand, parliamentary debates on child care are seen as being part of the education portfolio, while parental leave is linked to the employment rights of women, a division which had an impact upon parliamentary debates. Between 2000 and 2005, men dominated parliamentary speaking time on the topic of child care, while female MPs dominated parental leave discussions. This limitation must be borne in mind when trying to unravel whether female politicians have acted as and for women.

### Numbers, Roles, and Ideologies

Textual analysis of New Zealand parliamentary debates provides no evidence that there is a single “critical mass” that brought about wide-sweeping feminization of political processes and outcomes. Changing numbers of women in politics, however, do at times correlate to changes in the political agenda and in the reactions of legislators. Once female MPs move from being a token to a minority group in the New Zealand House of Representatives in 1984, there is an increase in the level of debate on issues such as child care and parental leave, and female politicians claim a greater stake in these debates. These findings on changes in the political agenda echo the results of studies from the United States, Europe, and Australia, though the threshold for change varies, ranging

from as low as 15% to 30% (see Freedman 2002, 186; Sawer 2000; Thomas 1991). But are the agenda changes evident in New Zealand and in other democracies due to rising numbers of women in the national legislature alone?

Researchers have long focused their attention on the numerical strength of women in national legislatures as the linchpin in improving the substantive representation of women, and in doing so have ignored the complexity of power relations in politics and how this affects the ability of female politicians to act as and for women. Women's numbers and their roles in government executives and in political parties are likely to affect any attempts to represent women as a group. The need to look at women's numerical strength within political parties is particularly true of strong party systems like New Zealand.

In the New Zealand political debates analyzed, politicians from both left- and right-leaning political parties made speeches in which they claimed to speak as a woman or on behalf of women; however, women of the left-leaning Labour Party made more gendered claims than their conservative colleagues. And it is during Labour government terms that there is evidence of an increase in debate on women's issues and the adoption of policies advancing the autonomy of women (such as paid parental leave).

Overt gender recognition by New Zealand's left-leaning women politicians and their support for women-friendly legislation is likely to be related to a number of factors, including the links that these women had with feminist organizations. As McAllister and Studlar (2002, 248) note, the substantive representation by female politicians requires an increase in feminist attitudes in the legislature (not just a rise in the number of female politicians). The ideologies of the major political parties are also likely to have affected the way female politicians talked about women in society. The Labour Party has traditionally been aligned with social democratic principles and with labor unions (although this relationship was strained in the 1980s when the Fourth Labour Government pursued neo-liberal reforms of the economy and state sector). The National Party is, on the other hand, historically associated with liberal ideals and with the business and farming sectors. And as National MP (and former Prime Minister) Jenny Shipley ("Human Rights Amendment Bill" 2001, 12996) noted: "we [the National Party] do not believe in collectivism."

Acknowledging the role of party ideology and personal beliefs on the activities of women politicians, in the New Zealand case, the numbers of women in the two major parties' parliamentary caucuses also appear



to have affected the attitudes of female legislators. Once Labour women MPs occupied minority status (over 15%) in their own party's parliamentary team, they frequently commented about the "team spirit" this engendered (Helen Clark, "General Debate" 1988a, 3643; Anne Fraser, "General Debate" 1988b, 5812). What we see is the creation of a safe space for Labour Party women, a safe space bolstered by numerical strength and the ideological leanings of both the female politicians and their party of choice. While National's female MPs set up formalized women's caucus meetings once their numbers in parliament reach eight (Shipley cited in Baysting et al. 1993, 99), their numbers have never been as high as those of their Labour counterparts, and there is no evidence from the debating chamber that National Party women saw themselves as a team.

The change in the reactions of the Labour women politicians is not the only such change seen in New Zealand as the number of women in the legislature rises. The increase in women as legislators in New Zealand has coincided with a rise in statements by politicians (particularly male politicians) expressing hostility toward feminism. However, as with other critical mass hypotheses, there is no indication of a single critical mass figure in the New Zealand House of Representatives that has led to this backlash toward feminist ideals. The backlash came at a time when women occupied 30% of both the House of Representatives and cabinet, and when a substantial number of women who frequently identified as feminists held prominent positions in the ruling Labour Party, including the post of prime minister.

This rise in hostility does appear to have consequences with regard to the substantive representation of women, with the textual analysis showing a drop in overt claims by New Zealand's female politicians that they are "acting for women" during the last five years of debates scrutinized (2000 to 2005). The backlash against feminism appears to have made female politicians (and particularly women in the Labour Party parliamentary caucus) reluctant to speak for women in parliamentary debates since 2000. This result is similar to the findings of Lyn Kathlene (1994, 573): In the U.S. legislatures she scrutinized, the more women who served on a committee, the more silenced women became, revealing the powerful impact of gender socialization.

The backlash to feminism, and the apparent reluctance to act as and for women in the following legislative debates, are not the only negative impacts that followed the rise in the numbers of women in New Zealand politics. Far from leading to increased claims about women's collective needs, the increased diversity in the debating chamber (ushered in by

the shift to a proportional representation system in New Zealand) has coincided with claims by many female MPs that they represent groups other than women or that they speak for subgroups of women. This diversity diluted the strategic essentialism of earlier debates. This finding around the increased diversity in the groups that female politicians claim to represent echoes the work of Beth Reingold (1992) and of Sue Thomas and Susan Welch (1991). This change, however, may not be seen as a negative consequence by all, for as Thomas and Welch (1991, 453) suggest, what is occurring is that women are no longer tokens, assigned to fill the women's position on certain committees, but are free to serve on a wider variety of committees.

## Conclusion

A joint-effect model into the substantive representation of women in politics would consider how the numbers of women in political parties and government executives, the positions of these women, and the reactions to their presence (both their own and others) impacts upon the ability and willingness of women politicians to act as and for women. The single case study of New Zealand indicates that women politicians have more readily acted as and for women when they have a team (of sufficient size), whose members have feminist leanings, and when they find themselves in a general environment supportive of feminist ideas. However, there is a point at which a new set of inhibitors, some linked to numerical strength, takes hold. The substantial rise in the numbers of women in the New Zealand parliament after 1996 acted to diffuse the strategic essentialism used by female politicians in earlier debates to advance women-friendly policies. This increased female presence in both the legislature and in government executives also correlates with a rise in overt hostility toward feminist agendas. Nonetheless, New Zealand is only one case, and there needs to be more work developing a joint-effect model through comparative work. The difficulty, ironically, is finding enough countries where women make up significant numbers in the legislature, political party caucuses, and in government executives—and all this over a significant time frame.

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## **The Substantive Representation of Women and PR: Some Reflections on the Role of Surrogate Representation and Critical Mass**

*Manon Tremblay, University of Ottawa*

Yesterday's suffragists and today's female activists who call for more women to be elected to parliament share some ideological grounds: They believe that women exercising the rights of citizenship, whether by voting or by being elected to office, can make a difference in politics. This reasoning was fed by the notion of critical mass, introduced in the political debates in 1988 by Drude Dahlerup. Elevated to lawlike status (or should I say dogma?), the concept of critical mass was quickly made the object of abusive interpretations, becoming synonymous with a relationship of cause and effect between presence and ideas (or between representation and responsiveness), and thus leading one to believe in the existence of a sisterhood among political women and a dialogue on their representational activities. Taking a leaf from the politicians' book, political scientists lost all prudence, abandoning themselves to blind generalizations with the powers that frame female politicians' words and acts. One of these forces is the electoral system. Although it plays a very important role in women's access to parliament, it was completely ignored by those who believe that in greater number, women will change politics.

This essay examines the relationships among descriptive representation, critical mass, and substantive representation, while taking into account the potential role of electoral systems in this equation. Although a multitude of studies have examined the impact of electoral systems on the percentage of women in politics, there is a conspicuous dearth of studies on their influence over the substantive representation of women.

This lack does not hinder us from pondering the question and putting forth the following reasoning on the basis of what we already know: Since proportional representation (PR) on average generates higher percentages of female parliamentarians than do majority systems, and since a critical mass of women appears to be a condition that promotes the substantive representation of women, PR, more than majority systems, should promote substantive representation of women.

This essay bases its inspiration in this reasoning. First, I explore some of the relationships among representation, electoral systems, and women. Second, I discuss the heuristic potential offered by the concept of surrogate representation and how it can enrich the concept of critical mass to constitute a tool that is better adapted to the study of the substantive representation of women.

### Representation, Electoral Systems, and Women

Although Hanna F. Pitkin develops a complex interpretation of political representation in *The Concept of Representation* (1967), more often works on political representation of women are only two-dimensional, limited to descriptive and/or substantive representations. This first conjures up the mirror concept: A legislative assembly is said to be representative if its composition reflects the whole (that is, the population). Substantive representation stresses and gives importance to what an elected individual thinks and does, rather than emphasizing who the person is; it requires deliberate actions. If political representation refers to normative theory and concepts, the way it is translated in practice depends on complex cultural and institutional settings specific to each country. One of the tools to operate the change from political representation as normative theory to political representation as practice is the electoral system.

Basically, there are three main types of electoral systems: majority (and plurality), proportional, and mixed systems. Each system conceptualizes representation differently. In PR, representation rests on the composition of democratic assemblies in order for them to reflect the characteristics that make up society (this reading is closer to Pitkin's conception of descriptive representation). In majority systems, representation is ensured by the representative and by her decisions in relation to the defense and promotion of interests associated with her electoral district (this is Pitkin's conception of substantive representation). Mixed systems bor-

row the idea of the political actor personifying the role of representation put forward by the majority systems with single-seat constituencies, and the idea of diversity and proportionality proposed by the PR with multi-seat districts.

Analyzing the proportion of female legislators according to these three types of electoral systems makes it possible to reveal a relatively convincing relationship between electoral systems and the feminization of parliaments: Counting only the 89 countries that Freedom House considers free, in October 2005 parliaments convened from majority systems had an average of 10.8% women within their membership, assemblies formed on the basis of mixed systems counted 17.7% women, and parliaments stemming from PR showed an average rate of 21.1%. In other words, legislative assemblies formed from majority systems count two times fewer women than do parliaments born of PR (particularly with party lists). This report confirms the conclusions of many studies showing that PR offers a greater potential for feminizing parliaments than do majority systems (see, e.g., Matland 1998; Norris 2004, 179–208; Rule 1987, 1994). PR seems, therefore, better equipped than majority systems to support the forming of a critical mass<sup>1</sup> of women in parliament.

The state of the research does not lend itself to equal understanding of the influence that the electoral systems have on women's substantive representation. Certainly, a number of studies have shown that many elected women believe they have a responsibility to represent women — that is to say, to represent them substantively by acting for women's concerns and women's perspectives. For instance, a research project undertaken by the Inter-Parliamentary Union with 200 female members of parliament (MPs) from 65 countries shows that 89% believed they had a particular responsibility to represent the needs and concerns of women (IPU 2000, 133–41). Moreover, a number of studies undertaken in countries using a diversified range of electoral systems led to the same conclusion (for example, in Australia and Canada [Tremblay 2003], England and Wales [Chaney 2006; Childs 2002], France [Sineau 2001], Israel [Golan and Hermann 2005], New Zealand [Grey 2002], the Scandinavian countries [Skjeie 1991; Wängnerud 2000] and in the United States [Carroll 2002]).

1. The proportion commonly established for critical mass is somewhere between 15% and 30%, a ceiling endorsed by the United Nations. On February 2006, only 20 of 187 countries in the Inter-Parliamentary Union had at least 30% women in their national parliament, and all (except Cuba) have PR (lists) or mixed (compensatory) systems.

Is it necessary to deduce from this uniformity that the electoral system would have no effect on substantive representation of women? This conclusion would be inadequate. As Marian Sawer (1998, 52) explains, in theory, proportional systems should be better able than majority systems to ensure women's substantive representation:

[U]nder PR, particularly where electoral districts are nation-wide (or in our case [Australia] State-wide), representational functions are less tied to a geographical constituency. Less time is consumed by problems of individual constituents or local issues and there is more scope for the representation of broader interests which cross geographical boundaries, including issues of equal opportunity for women and minorities.

Pippa Norris, as well as Shaun Bowler and David Farrell, support this reasoning. Norris (2004, 260–61) demonstrated that candidate ballots, which are used most frequently in majority systems,<sup>2</sup> invite individual politicians to develop connections with their electorate through local representation and to adopt a certain distance from their political party. By contrast, party ballots (and particularly those that do not include a preferential vote) invite politicians to hide behind their political party and to develop a representation style that is more sensitive to global than to local issues. In research carried out on members of the European Parliament, Bowler and Farrell (1993) noted that the MEPs elected under candidate-ballots systems were more inclined to maintain regular contact with their electorate, whereas MEPs elected under party-ballots systems were more likely to develop connections with particular electoral clienteles. In addition, while in majority systems with single-seat constituencies the selection process for candidatures is a zero-sum game in which only one person comes out the winner, in PR (notably with party lists) the selection process of candidatures gives political parties the opportunity to respond to the various interests and factions that make them up and to solicit targeted clienteles in the electorate (including women). Put simply, PR with multiseat districts depersonalizes the mandate of representation: While in majority systems representation means a clearly identified link between a representative and a local electoral district, in PR it implies a more diffused one between many representatives and a given electoral area (i.e., a region, a state, the entire country) or a community of interests defined by identity, gender, ethnicity, and so on. Finally, as mentioned previously, PR tends to generate higher proportions

2. But which are used with preferential voting in PR.

of women in parliament than do majority systems,<sup>3</sup> and consequently supports the attainment of a critical mass of women in politics.

While relatively convincing connections can be seen among electoral systems, descriptive representation, and critical mass, the same does not apply when the substantive representation of women is called into question. Though the proportion (or critical mass) of women stems considerably from the mechanics of electoral systems,<sup>4</sup> this latter does not necessarily entail a critical mass of women (whether in PR or in majority systems) in the representation of women from a substantive point of view. Certainly, *in theory*, PR seems to offer more fertile ground for the substantive representation of women. But *in practice*, studies of female politicians elected through a broad range of electoral systems and constituting extremely variable proportions within their national parliament (13% in France versus 50% in Wales, for example) point toward a common finding, that of recognizing the responsibility to represent women. For me, this is encouragement for reexamining the concept of critical mass so that it will better serve the study of the substantive representation of women.

### Surrogate Representation By and Critical Mass of Women in Politics

According to Jane Mansbridge (2003, 522), "Surrogate representation is representation by a representative with whom one has no electoral relationship." It implies that a representative "acts for the interests of voters beyond the boundaries of the representative's district" (Carroll 2002, 51). This model calls up Edmund Burke's notion of virtual representation: "Virtual representation is that in which there is a communion of interests and a sympathy in feelings and desires between those who act in the name of any description of people and the people in whose name they act, though the trustees are not actually chosen by them" (Burke quoted in Williams 1998, 35). In other words, surrogate representation dissolves the conventional electoral ties between a representative and a given territory postulated by all electoral systems (be it a local district or the entire country). Surrogate representation can even be expressed on the

3. PR does not automatically generate higher proportions of female MPs. Many conditions must be combined, for example, high district and party magnitudes, gender quotas on the lists and penalties for noncompliance.

4. Rule (1994, 16) fixes this contribution at 30%.



international level when, for example, a Canadian female MP puts pressure on her government for it to increase foreign aid for birth control or when she denounces rape as a weapon of war.

Surrogate representatives do not have to be descriptive representatives. But as Mansbridge (1999, 642) explains: “[I]t is in this surrogate process that descriptive representation often plays its most useful role, allowing representatives who are themselves members of a subordinate group to circumvent the strong barriers to communication between dominant and subordinate groups.” Though similarity may indeed inspire confidence, it does not necessarily bring representation, which is fostered by common experiences and weak presence: “That sense of surrogate responsibility becomes stronger when the surrogate representative shares experiences with surrogate constituents in a way that a majority of the legislature does not. . . . Feelings of responsibility for constituents outside one’s district grow even stronger when the legislature includes *few*, or *disproportionately few*, representatives of the group in question” (Mansbridge 2003, 523; my emphasis). Far from requiring critical mass, surrogate representation works within contexts of low numbers.

These two criteria—common experiences and weak presence—help theorize women’s political representation in terms of surrogate representation. Several political theorists have argued that historically marginalized social identities should be represented by members of those groups—in other words, women should be represented by female parliamentarians because they share an identity and experiences which, for the most part, remain foreign to male politicians (among others, Dovi 2002; Mansbridge 1999, 2001; Phillips 1995; Williams 1998; Young 1989). In 2006, the worldwide average percentage of women in the single or lower houses of national parliaments is 16.6%.<sup>5</sup> In only 20 out of 187 countries in the Inter-Parliamentary Union do women make up at least 30% of the members.

Women’s surrogate representation cannot be passive. It requires consciousness on the part of political women; that is to say, they must consciously commit themselves to representing women. At the least, this commitment calls for a gender consciousness, which implies recognizing that sex/gender differences are not neutral in that they structure the social interactions between women and men. In other words, women’s surrogate representation is not synonymous with feminist representation. Although it can certainly adopt this orientation, it can also consist

5. See [www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm); accessed March 7, 2006.

of wanting to consolidate the equity of traditional gender roles (for example, so that housewives are not thrown out on the street after divorce). Conservative MPs may work for gender equality and equity in a way congruent with the feminist ethos and movement (Schreiber 2002, Tremblay and Pelletier 2003).

To sum up, not only does surrogate representation emancipate political representation from its conventional geographical grounding (which many have interpreted as an asset of PR in representing women from a substantive point of view), but it also encourages representation based on social identities and gender consciousness by strengthening the relationship between presence and ideas, and does so, apparently, without reference to the electoral system. Can we conclude that electoral systems have no impact on the substantive representation of women? Certainly not.

Although a critical mass of women in politics does not in any way guarantee substantive representation for women, electing female surrogate representatives of women improves the chances of it happening because these political women feel that they have a responsibility to represent women. (This does not, however, imply that they necessarily follow through on this responsibility—but that is another debate.) Yet, as mentioned previously, a rich literature shows that historically marginalized social identities (such as women) tend to be descriptively better represented in parliaments elected through PR. Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that because it generally produces a higher proportion of women in parliament, PR will also generate by default a larger number of female surrogate representatives of women. This is, however, a hypothesis that remains to be confirmed by empirical tests.

Why focus on the number of female surrogate representatives of women since, as already mentioned, surrogate representation is far from requiring a critical mass and instead readily adapts itself to low numbers? In fact, the number of female surrogate representatives of women is not crucial for enabling surrogate representation, since just one woman may suffice (Childs and Withey, 2006). However, larger numbers can support the recognition and consideration of the diversity of ideas, perspectives, and concerns both among women as politicians and women in the general population. This opening to diversity will feed the gathering and discussion functions unique to deliberative representation. It will also contribute to developing a flexibility of movement for women in politics, who see their mandate of representation structured by various constraints and opportunities. As Carroll (2002, 67) notes, however, the

diversity and flexibility unique to surrogate representation present their own surprises:

[E]ven when women members of Congress act in ways that they perceive as representing women, their actions may not always look the same. They may vote differently, offer different amendments, or favor different legislative solutions. Consequently, the changes in policy making that result from congresswomen's surrogate representation of women's interests will not always be unidirectional, straightforward, or uncomplicated.

A critical mass of female surrogate representatives of women can support but in no way guarantee the substantive representation of women, attenuating at best the still-unresolved tension between representation and responsiveness.

It is now generally accepted that a critical mass of women in politics does not necessarily translate into substantive representation of women, since this latter depends on many factors, such as gender identity, party affiliation, and the legislative roles of women. What is surprising is that electoral systems, which in practice solidify political representation, have not yet been taken into account in this interconnection of descriptive representation, critical mass, and substantive representation of women. In fact, it would probably be fairer to say that electoral systems have been taken into account for their mechanical effects on the proportion of women (or critical mass) in parliament. The concept of surrogate representation calls into question, however, the psychological effects of electoral systems on the behavior of women elected in politics.

Thus, future research should explore how the psychological effects of the electoral systems do or do not generate incentives for women to act in certain ways once elected. For example, since preferential voting encourages candidates to develop a personal vote, it should prompt them, more than for their counterparts on a closed list, to solicit women's groups and, once elected, to feel accountable in representing them—whereas closed lists encourage loyalty to the party that decides who shall have a seat in parliament. This is a line of questioning that deserves to be explored, if only to nuance a largely widespread—and unfounded—belief that closed lists would be more favorable to representation of women than open lists. (In fact, though this may be the case for descriptive representation, it is not so for substantive representation.) More generally, in a context where PR (and mixed) systems have more and more adepts on the international level, and their adoption is often accompanied by quotas to encourage women's access to parliamentary representation, it

becomes imperative to understand the complex and multi-faceted effects of electoral systems on how female parliamentarians conceive of their role in the representation of women.

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## The Story of the Theory of Critical Mass

*Drude Dahlerup, Stockholm University*

The theory of a "critical mass" seems to live a life of its own, in spite of reservations expressed by researchers, my own reservations included. In debates about women's political representation, the importance of a certain number or percentage of women in political assemblies is often stressed. According to conventional wisdom, research has shown that it takes a certain minimum representation, for example, 30%, before the minority, here women, are able to make a substantial difference in politics.

In this essay, I examine the theoretical foundation and underlying assumptions of the critical mass theory. Already in the 1980s, the idea of a specific turning point, for example, 30% women, was rejected. Later the notion of irreversibility was questioned following an actual decrease in women's representation in, among others, the Eastern and Central European countries. I will, however, argue that while the theory has been

contested in the scholarly literature, *a story of the theory of a critical mass* has played an important role for women politicians themselves, as well as for those advocating increased representation for women in politics, most recently for the many who advocate introducing electoral gender quotas. One may ask why 30% is the most widespread quota percentage.

Rejecting a specific turning point and the notion of incessant progress does not imply that numbers or proportions of minorities in political assemblies have no significance. More empirical research is needed on this theme. The theory of a critical mass is closely related to the discussion of whether “women politicians make a difference.” In this essay, the validity of this very question is scrutinized. It is finally argued that a distinction should be made between *the policy outcome perspective* and *the politics as a workplace perspective* when discussing the importance of the relative numbers of women (or other minorities).

### The Critical Mass Theory of the 1980s

In the 1980s, the critical mass argument was primarily applied to situations where women had *not* reached 30% in parliaments or local councils. Consequently, the argument was that it was unrealistic to expect major changes until women’s representation had reached a critical mass, because a small number of women in politics tend to be tokens.

Originally, the term *critical mass* was borrowed from nuclear physics, where it refers to the quantity needed to start a chain reaction, an *irreversible turning point*, a takeoff into a new situation or process. By analogy, it has been said that a qualitative shift will take place when women exceed a proportion of about 30% in an organization. In this way, the move from a small to a large minority is significant. *Thus numbers, or rather percentages, count* (Dahlerup 1988, 275–76).

Important points about minority behavior were taken from the organizational theory of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1977). Even if she herself did not use the concept of a critical mass, her theory, as well as Helen Mayer Hacker’s classic article on women’s minority status in society at large (1951), gave inspiration to the discussion among feminist political scientists in the 1980s of applying a critical mass theory to our studies of women in politics.

In my 1988 article, I both constructed and critically reconstructed the critical mass theory. This article, which was based on the Nordic experience with over 30% women in parliament, concluded that no specific

turning point can be identified, and that consequently the *critical mass* perspective should be replaced by a focus on *critical acts* that will empower women in general, for example, gender quotas. Dissatisfied with the contemporary, rather narrow, discussion of why women do not make more of a difference in politics, the article suggested broadening the research agenda by identifying six different aspects of changes that might follow from changes in the relative number of women and men (Dahlerup 1988, 283–84):

1. Changes in the reaction to women politicians;
2. Changes in the performance and efficiency of women politicians;
3. Changes in the social climate of political life (the political culture);
4. Changes in the political discourse;
5. Changes of policy (the political decisions);
6. Increase in the power of women (the empowerment of women).

The *politics as a workplace perspective* (points 2–4) was less developed before the 1980s because focus had been on the perspective of policy change (point 5). In a later section of this essay, I develop the point that the importance of the relative number of women seems to vary depending on the chosen perspective. However, systematic longitudinal research on changes of the more qualitative aspects of the gender structure of the Nordic or other parliaments has been and is still lacking to a large extent.

My 1988 article pointed to the difficulties in isolating the effect of the increasing proportion of women from what happens outside the parliament. Only when it comes to changes in the social climate of the political institutions (point 3), one can expect “a kind of ‘automatic’ change when the minority grows large.” Such changes occurred, however, even when the first women entered the meeting room, the argument went. Furthermore, I argued that with a large minority of women in politics, “the open resistance against women politicians is removed — now it seems hopeless to bring women back to the [home]” (Dahlerup 1988, 295–96). A rereading of my 1988 article makes evident that while the notion of a specific turning point, for example, at 30%, had been rejected by the 1980s, the idea of irreversibility, which matched the optimism of the 1980s, was not challenged until later, when we experienced actual examples of severe backlash in women’s representation in the 1990s. With the rise of fundamentalism in many parts of the world, a backlash against

feminism in general has become part of today's options, replacing the optimism of the 1970s and 80s.

The many references to my 1988 article in the literature reveal that it no doubt contributed not only to the scientific debate on the critical mass theory but also to the construction of *the story of the critical mass theory*, which, in spite of reservations in the scholarly literature, nevertheless has been influential, as the following section will show.

### The Use of the “Story of the Critical Mass Theory”

The “story of the critical mass theory” refers to the actual use of the theory of a critical mass. When feminist movements and female politicians themselves make use of this “theory,” it becomes important in itself, in spite of all scholarly reservations. Again and again one hears, as part of conventional wisdom, that research has shown that there must be at least 30% women, a critical mass, for women to make a difference in politics.

The theory—or, as I would prefer to label it, the story of the theory of a critical mass—is frequently used to cover two different situations. First, it is being used by female politicians who are defending themselves against the critique, primarily brought forward by the women's movements, that women politicians do not make enough of a difference once elected. It is important to note that feminists, ever since the election of the first women local councillors and parliamentarians, have expressed this kind of critique.

Second, advocates of enhancing women's political representation have frequently used the critical mass argument. It is said that political parties should nominate not just the obligatory lone woman but at least a critical mass of women, because the voters demand it or in order to ensure that the elected women are not just a token few. During the last decade or two, we have witnessed the critical mass argument being used among advocates of the introduction of electoral gender quotas in order to effect a rapid increase in the number of female politicians (Dahlerup 2006). This section focuses on the use of the story of the critical mass theory in debates about introducing gender quotas for public elections.

In the present research project, “Electoral Gender Quotas—a Key to Equality?” (2003) which concerns the global trend to introduce gender quotas for public election, we often find the story of a “critical mass” (see Dahlerup 2006; Dahlerup and Freidenvall 2005; “Global Database of



Quotas for Women” 2006). In the last 10 to 15 years, almost 50 countries have introduced gender quotas by law or constitutional amendment (legal quotas). In a larger number of countries, some of the political parties have voluntarily introduced gender quotas for the party’s own list for public election (voluntary party quotas). Such quota provisions may target the pool of aspirants, the composition of the candidate lists, or the actual number of women to be elected, also called reserved seats (for types of quota systems, see Dahlerup 2006, 21, 294).

Electoral gender quotas come in many forms and use many different percentages or numbers, from Nepal’s 5% to Sweden’s and France’s 50%. When it comes to candidate quotas, however, legal as well as voluntary party quotas, *30% is the most widespread percentage chosen* (Dahlerup 2006; [www.quotaproject.org](http://www.quotaproject.org)). It is worth looking at why this is the case and whether there is a connection to the story of the critical mass. It should be noticed, however, that it is often difficult to trace the reason for the choice of percentage in the individual cases.

In 1990, the United Nations Economic and Social Council endorsed a target of 30% women in decision-making positions in the world by 1995. This target was far from met, since in 1995 only 10% of the world’s parliamentarians were women, in 2005, only 16%, still far from one-third ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)). Consequently, many countries have opted for fast track policies like quotas. During the 1990s, several international declarations recommended a target or a quota of 30%.

International recommendations are important because they can render legitimacy to national advocacy for more women in politics (Krook 2004). In many countries, advocates of gender quotas in politics refer to the UN Platform for Action, Beijing 1995, and to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Although the Platform for Action does not employ the controversial word “quota,” the platform is nevertheless cited as supporting gender quotas in politics because it advocates “special targets and implementing measures . . . if necessary through positive action” (United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women [henceforth FWCW] 1995, Art. 190a). Similarly, the CEDAW convention of 1979 speaks of “special measures.”

A shift is taking place from demands for 30%, or minority representation, to a more radical demand for 50%, or gender balance in politics. But while, for example, the Platform for Action represents this new line in its demand for equal representation, it nevertheless continues to argue for securing a “critical mass” of women in parliaments (FWCW 1995, Art. 181–95).

The Socialist International and especially Socialist International women have been very active in advocating gender quotas in socialist parties all over the world. This organization played an important role in the quota debate on the Balkans, to mention one region (Antić and Lokar 2006). Even if its recommendations argue for “the assurance of gender-balanced representation in party structures” and “the preparation of more gender-balanced lists of candidates for elections of any kind” (Socialist International Women 1998), the demand for gender balance is, in most member parties, translated into a demand for 30% women. Very few socialist/social democratic parties employ 50% quotas, among them the Social Democratic Party in Sweden and PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) in Mexico, while some additional parties have 40% quotas for their electoral lists, among them the Social Democratic Parties in Croatia, Norway, Germany, and Spain. The most frequent quota among those member parties of Socialist International that have adopted voluntary party quotas for their electoral list and for the internal party structures is 30% (“Global Database of Quotas for Women” 2006).

In its 1997 “Declaration on Gender and Development,” the Southern African Development Community, SADC, made a commitment to achieve a 30% representation of women in politics and decision making by the year 2005. A 1999 conference, organized by SADC’s Gender Unit and titled “Beyond 30 Percent in 2005: Women and Decision-making in SADC,” adopted a far-reaching program for gender parity in the region (Lowe-Morna 2004).

More research is needed at the level of individual countries in order to answer the question of how and why 30% became the most widespread quota regime. Latin America may serve as an example. Latin America is the leading region in the world when it comes to legal candidate gender quotas. Why have Argentina and, after Argentina, so many others of the quota countries in the region chosen 30% as their target? In her overview of electoral gender quotas in Latin America, Jacqueline Peschard writes: “Quotas result from [*sic*] the greater presence of women, and are useful for encouraging a larger mobilization along these lines, in order to constitute a ‘critical mass,’ which is believed is reached with about 30 per cent representation” (Peschard 2003).<sup>1</sup> It seems obvious that it is the story of critical mass theory, and not any actual examples of experiences with a critical mass, that has been most important for the outcome.

1. Here, J. Peschard refers not to Latin American experiences but to the Spanish translation of my 1988 article (Dahlerup 1993).

Even if the story of the critical mass no doubt has been important for the new trend to introduce electoral gender quotas and for the preference for 30% quotas, the occurrence of other motives cannot be excluded—such as increasing the number of women in order to look modern and democratic or simply in order to avoid the more radical demand for real gender balance as those expressed in the 50/50 campaigns of the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO 2005).

The wish that women will “make a difference” in politics is the agenda of the women's movements. Generally speaking, party leaderships recruit women not to get a different politics but to gain votes. Once elected, most parties want “their” women members of parliament (MPs) to work as loyal party representatives. But for the women's movement this question has been crucial.

### **The Validity of the Question of “Making a Difference”**

The concept of a critical mass is closely related to the debate about whether women in politics will “make a difference.” Even if we limit the discussion to changes in public policy (see point 5 in the first section), we are still left with the fundamental problem that making a difference is in fact a very diffuse concept. Within the broad range of women's organizations, we will not find any agreement about what making a difference implies. At play in this discussion are concepts like “women's issues,” “feminist issues,” “gendered issues,” and “women-friendly policies” (Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers 2003); “accountability to women,” “gender-sensitive policies,” “women's political effectiveness” (Goetz 2003); “strategic gender interests” (Molyneux 2001); and “feminizing politics” (Lovenduski 2005). When we move from the theoretical discussions of “politics of presence” and of “descriptive” versus “substantive” representation to empirical analysis of the relation between the proportion of women (or any other minority in politics) and “making a difference,” we are still in need of a more precise definition of the dependent variable, the notion of making a difference, as Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2003) and many others have also argued.

### **The Difference Fallacy**

Methodological problems are also involved, in what I label “the difference fallacy.” It is often an underlying assumption in empirical studies

that female politicians have proven to make a difference in politics, if the researcher is able to identify some difference between women and men (for instance, differences in attitudes, issue priorities, the number of petitions on certain subjects, the way of speaking in politics, and contacts with women's organizations). Often this research has, in fact, been able to show various differences between politicians on the basis of gender. For instance, there is enough evidence to make it possible to conclude that women politicians all over the world tend to be more active than are their male colleagues when it comes to placing equality policy on the political agenda (Goetz and Hassim 2003; Lovenduski 2005; Skjeie 1992). This type of research also reveals that not all women agree and that party affiliation is extremely important in most political systems, even if some gender differences remain after controlling for party affiliation.<sup>2</sup>

*Making a difference is not the same as staying different.* The difference fallacy implies underestimating the obvious possibility that women, as politicians, perhaps especially when there are many of them, have been able to influence their male colleagues and thus change either the overall political agenda or the agenda of their individual parties (or both), with the consequence that only few gender differences in attitudes and actions can be identified. Since cross-party cooperation among women MPs is usually considered suspicious, female politicians will see it as a success if they have managed to place new issues, like violence against women or child care, on the political agenda in consensus with their male colleagues in parliament.<sup>3</sup> Alternative research strategies, such as longitudinal studies of changes in political discourses in parliament and analyses of parliamentary decision making are needed in order to identify much more subtle changes.

Even if researchers should choose to abandon the very question of whether women make a difference, Marian Sawer rightly states that we cannot expect campaigns for more women in politics to give up on the "making a difference" discourse (Sawer 2000, 377). The justice argument was never the only argument put forward by women's movements, which always have envisioned that women would change politics for the better for women and for humanity at large.

2. It should be noted that such differences in attitudes and actions in this type of research are not seen as an essentialist, sex-specific feature, but rather as historical constructs, with large differentiation according to time and location.

3. In one-party systems or in political systems with one dominating party, cooperation among women parliamentarians or the establishment of a women's caucus in parliament is not considered illegitimate to the same extent as in multiparty party systems. Women's joint actions in Rwanda and within the African National Congress are examples of this.

## Reformulating the Hypothesis on Minority Representation— Do Numbers Matter?

Having rejected the idea of a specific turning point, a takeoff into a new situation when the minority increases, say, to over 30%, and having rejected the notion of irreversibility, what is left of the theory of a critical mass? The answer is that we need more specific, empirical-based research about the importance of the size of the minority under different conditions.

It seems crucial to make a distinction between the following two research questions: First, does the proportion of women in political institutions make a difference for the content of the political decisions—*the policy outcome perspective*; and, second, does the proportion of women in political institutions make a difference for the possibility that female MPs will perform as representatives the way they want—*the politics as a workplace perspective*? These questions correspond to points 2–4 in the first section list. The overall research question is that of the importance of the relative number of the minority, everything else being equal. Larger questions, such as the importance of women's representation for the legitimacy of democracy, are omitted from this more specific discussion.

The relative number of women as a minority in political institutions is more important, I argue, regarding the second question concerning politics as a workplace. With this question, we return to Kanter's organizational perspectives. My formulation of this question deliberately avoids linking the question of effectiveness of women politicians to the pursuit of a feminist agenda. It deals instead with the importance of women's relative number for their ability to become effective in their work, to perform their tasks as politicians the way they individually prefer, in spite of being a minority inside and outside parliament.<sup>4</sup> This question raises several potential research topics, such as the connection between the relative number of the minority and issues like stigmatization, exclusion, incumbency, and role models. If we are able to confirm the importance of the relative number of women for their efficiency in politics seen as a workplace, then it might influence our understanding of how numbers of women might make a difference in the content of political decision making. The hypothesis is that political life is much harder for women politicians who *want* to pursue a feminist agenda, if they also have to fight for their basic rights as women parliamentarians and local councillors.

4. While Goetz's concept of "women's political effectiveness" includes voicing political issues of concern to women (Goetz 2003, 29), my concept of effectiveness is open to any kind of agenda that the individual or group of female politicians wants to pursue, including nonfeminist goals.

Concerning the first question, I argue that number and percentages are of only minor importance for the policy outcome. Even a few women in politics, under the right circumstances, can make a big difference, while a large minority of women parliamentarians may not wish or be able to change the political agenda in a certain political system at a certain time. At any rate, numbers interrelate with other factors, and consequently, isolating the effect of sheer numbers is almost impossible.

It may be that the attempts to link the relative number of women to policy outcomes are largely misplaced in research. As Joni Lovenduski points out: “[F]eminizing politics is like many other political processes” (2005, 180). I argue that the adoption of feminist public policies depends largely on the same type of factors that we study concerning other political issues, like environmental policies or social policies: the political context, state feminist machineries, prevailing discourses, framing of the issue, coalition building, and movement strength, among others. The number of women in parliaments is probably not the most crucial factor, even if numbers, of course, are important for any parliamentary majority building.<sup>5</sup>

This reasoning, however, does not imply that increasing women’s political representation is unimportant for issues of citizenship, democracy, and development. The new trend of introducing gender quotas in post-conflict societies often rests on discourses of the importance of the inclusion of women for the development of democracy (Dahlerup 2006). For example, “GEMSA is aware that the mere representation of women in politics is not equivalent to gender transformation. However, we also firmly believe that transformation cannot begin to take place when over half the population is effectively excluded from decision-making!” (Gender and Media 2006).

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5. The Danish case illustrates that numbers are of less importance than the political context. Even if the relative number of women in the Danish parliament increased gradually over time, there were more feminist women parliamentarians in the 1980s than in the 1990s. Now, experienced feminists have begun to keep a low profile in parliament, and young women politicians have been eager to stress that they were not feminists. In a comparison with Sweden, a country that did not experience such a backlash in the 1990s, I explain this remarkable and recent differentiation between the two neighboring countries with the variations in the strength of their feminist movements and of state feminism (Dahlerup 2004).

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## Should Feminists Give Up on Critical Mass?

### A Contingent Yes\*

*Sarah Childs, University of Bristol*

*Mona Lena Krook, Washington University in St. Louis*

Today’s historic level of women in national parliaments—while still far short of parity at 16%—owes much to the global spread of gender quotas. This process, in turn, owes much to the concept of “critical mass”: International organizations, transnational networks, party politicians, women’s activists, and even ordinary citizens argue that women should constitute 30% of all political bodies, the magic number where female legislators are said to be able to make a difference. As the notion of critical mass has gained wide currency in the real world, however, many scholars have come to question its utility and relevance for analyzing women’s legislative behavior. Indeed, as the number of studies grows, it is increasingly obvious that there is neither a single nor a universal relationship between the percentage of women elected to political office and the passage of legislation beneficial to women as a group: In some cases, women are able to work more effectively together as their numbers grow, but in others, women appear to make a difference—in fact, sometimes a greater difference—when they form a small minority of legislators, either because their increased numbers provoke a backlash among male legislators or because their increased numbers allow individual women to pursue

\*This title adapts two classic articles on women’s political representation: Anne Phillips’ “Must Feminists Give Up on Liberal Democracy?” (1993), and Jane Mansbridge’s “Should Women Represent Women and Blacks Represent Blacks: A Contingent Yes” (1999).



other policy goals. These contradictions thus raise the question: Should feminists give up on critical mass? Or are there any compelling reasons—either theoretical or practical—for retaining the concept in debates on women’s political representation?

### The Origins of Critical Mass and “Critical Mass Theory”

To advocate giving up on critical mass is neither an insignificant nor a purely academic concern: It runs the very real risk of leaving supporters of women’s representation without a crucial tool for increasing the number of women elected to political office. A closer look at the academic literature, however, reveals that it has been interpreted and applied in many different ways over the last 20 years. In her seminal contributions to these debates, for example, Rosabeth Moss Kanter outlines three expectations regarding increased numbers of women in corporate life: 1) With an increase in their relative numbers, women are potentially allies, can form coalitions, and can affect the culture of the group; 2) with an increase in their relative numbers, women can begin to become individuals differentiated from one another; and 3) with an increase in their absolute numbers, despite few changes in their relative numbers, women can develop supportive alliances and affect the culture of the group so long as they are “feminist” or “women-identified-women” (Kanter 1977a, 966; 1977b, 238). Bringing these insights into the field of women and politics, Drude Dahlerup (1988) tests the first conjecture but ultimately uses her evidence to reject the notion of critical mass in favor of “critical acts,” on the grounds that relative proportions of women seem to be less important than individual policy entrepreneurs in explaining women-friendly policy gains.

Following Dahlerup, many scholars reduce Kanter’s three conjectures into one, anticipating that increased numbers will facilitate coalitions among women. At the same time, nearly all present Dahlerup’s work as if she had made a strong case in favor of critical mass, when she, in fact, argues for focusing on critical acts. We label these misrepresentations “critical mass theory,” an approach to the study of women’s legislative behavior that distorts the work of Kanter and Dahlerup but—through strong consistencies across accounts—plays a central role in structuring research on women and politics. Its applications concentrate exclusively on opportunities for women to form coalitions with one another, finding that legislatures with high proportions of women intro-

duce and pass more bills on women's issues than do their female counterparts in low-representation legislatures (Saint-Germain 1989; Thomas 1994). In contrast, its critiques emerge from cases where policy change does not occur with increased numbers of women (Childs 2004; Rosenthal 1998), or where policy reforms take place despite relatively small numbers of women (Reingold 2000; Towns 2003). Thus, applications adopt Kanter's first claim and Dahlerup's notion of critical mass, while critiques present evidence that corroborates Kanter's second and third claims and Dahlerup's idea of critical acts (Childs and Krook 2005). This disjuncture between the origins of critical mass and how it is represented in critical mass theory suggests a need to revisit relations between numbers and outcomes in research on women's political representation.

### Dimensions of the Substantive Representation of Women

Turning our backs on critical mass theory, we propose two means for rethinking this debate: 1) reformulating the central research question from *when* women make a difference to *how* the substantive representation of women occurs, and 2) refocusing the investigation from the macro level (i.e., what do "women" do?) to the micro level (i.e., what do specific women do?). Combined, these two moves open up a series of new possibilities for analyzing legislative behavior by relaxing overly restrictive analytical frames regarding the form and content of "acting for women." To facilitate the first shift, we identify five dimensions that merit further consideration when analyzing women's substantive representation.

*Anticipated effects of increased proportions of women in political office.* As already noted, the most common assumption is that as women grow more numerous in legislative chambers, they will be increasingly able to form strategic coalitions with one another in order to promote legislation related to women's concerns (Thomas 1994). Existing research, however, presents at least four other scenarios that might prove to be more compelling starting points for analyzing individual cases: A rise in the number of women may influence men's behavior in a feminist direction, causing both male and female legislators to pay more attention to women's issues (Bratton 2005; Flammang 1985); the increased presence of women may provoke a backlash among male legislators, who may employ a range of tactics to obstruct women's policy initiatives and keep them outside positions of power (Hawkesworth 2003; Heath, Schwandt-Bayer, and Taylor-Robinson 2005); a lower proportion of

women may be more effective than a higher number because female legislators may be able to specialize in women's concerns without appearing to undermine male domination (Crowley 2004; Dodson and Carroll 1991); and a rise in the overall number of women may result in the election of an increasingly more diverse group who may or may not be interested in pursuing women's issues, either because their priorities lie elsewhere or because they believe that other female legislators will continue to lobby on behalf of women (Carroll 2001; Schwindt-Bayer 2004).

*Constraining and enabling characteristics of legislative contexts.* The literature similarly points to a multiplicity of factors that limit and enhance opportunities for women to translate policy preferences into legislative initiatives on behalf of women. Much of this research focuses on institutional rules and norms that reflect a bias toward men's experiences and authority (Hawkesworth 2003; Kathlene 1995), and as such, compel women to conform to existing masculine legislative practices in ways that undermine their ability to integrate women's perspectives into public policymaking (Carroll 2001). Many scholars also note the impact of party affiliation and ideology on women's legislative activities, observing that mechanisms of candidate selection, combined with pressures for party discipline, determine what kinds of women are elected, as well as the specific policy positions that they are likely to take once they accede to political office (Cowley and Childs 2003; Gotell and Brodie 1991). Others, however, draw attention to institutional norms that facilitate women's participation (Chaney forthcoming), including the presence of women's caucuses and women's policy machineries (Thomas 1994; Weldon 2002), and point out that some party ideologies offer greater opportunities for women to pursue feminist policy concerns (Reingold 2000; Swers 2002).

*Identities and interests of female and male legislators.* Nearly all work on women's substantive representation addresses individual features that facilitate and undermine cooperation among women in political office. While many political theorists aim to discern or define a shared perspective among women as a group in order to justify calls for their increased political presence, most empirical studies stress divisions among women—like race, class, age, and party affiliation—that prevent the formulation of a collective legislative agenda (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Swers 2002). Indeed, some argue that identity categories like “women” are inherently exclusionary and serve to reify one difference while erasing and obscuring others (Carroll 2001). Further, “gender” is not a prepolitical and

fixed identity that women bring with them when they enter politics, but one that is partially produced and reproduced within the context of particular legislatures (Townes 2003; Whip 1991). Others question the elision of women's bodies with feminist minds, on the grounds that being female may matter less than "gender consciousness" does for achieving feminist outcomes (Childs 2004; Reingold 2000).

*Feminist and nonfeminist definitions of women's issues.* These variations and ambiguities are reflected further in competing definitions of "women's issues." Scholars adopt various approaches that include policies that increase the autonomy and well-being of women (Bratton 2005; Wängnerud 2000); concerns that belong to the private sphere according to established views on gender relations (Meyer 2003); areas where surveys discover a gender gap in the population (Schwindt-Bayer 2004); and any issues of concern to the broader society (Dolan and Ford 1995). As such, some prefer feminist definitions that focus on role change for women through increases in autonomy and the scope for personal choice (Dodson and Carroll 1991; Reingold 2000), while others opt for more inclusive ones that capture a broader range of issues affecting women's everyday lives (Swers 2002). Yet others favor definitions based on the concerns articulated by women's movements at various moments in time, which allow women's issues to remain a priori undefined, context-related, and subject to evolution (Celis 2004), as well as a collective product that emerges as women interact with other women to identify their priorities (Weldon 2002).

*Stable and contingent features of policymaking processes.* The possibility to achieve gains for women depends closely on features of the policymaking process, which influence how and when women's issues reach the legislative agenda, as well as their ultimate prospects for being passed into law. Most research focuses on stable features, finding that women as a group have the greatest impact—or, more specifically, tend to differ most from men—in terms of setting the legislative agenda and proposing new bills that address issues of concern to women (Childs 2004; Swers 2004). For this reason, many criticize studies that focus exclusively on legislative voting, because these assume that enactment is the most important stage of the policymaking process (Tamerius 1995). While some suggest that the best solution is to examine the entire legislative process (Carroll 2001; Swers 2002), others point out that policymaking often involves numerous elements of contingency that make such models appear overly simplistic. On the one hand, complex combinations of

actors—often in series of chance events—are generally responsible for moving an issue to agenda prominence and gaining its passage (Childs and Withey 2006; cf. Kingdon 1984). On the other hand, policy innovations rarely proceed in a vacuum, because policy cycles and demonstration effects strongly condition which issues enter and are kept off of legislative agendas, separate from any assumed prerequisites for change (Bratton and Ray 2002).

### From Critical Mass to “Critical Actors”

Examining these five dimensions reveals multiple facets within what might be considered the substantive representation of women, opening up a range of possibilities for defining what acting for women might constitute in various places and times. They do not in themselves explain, however, how changes in the numbers of women in political assemblies translate more concretely into specific policy outcomes. To unravel these processes, we turn to studies in other fields that also employ the notion of critical mass to analyze collective behavior. We find that they shift focus from macro-level patterns to micro-level actions in order to theorize the contingent calculations of individuals within groups that may explain why similar distributions of preferences do not always translate into comparable collective outcomes. To take one example, studies of thresholds and human behavior frame individual decisions to act in terms of the proportion of others who also choose to act, on the grounds that the costs and benefits of an actor making a certain choice depend in part on how many others decide to make that choice (Schelling 1978). For subjective reasons, however, individuals view these costs and benefits differently and thus vary in terms of how many others need to act before they do so themselves: “Radicals” have low thresholds, as they will act even if many others do not, while “conservatives” have high thresholds, as they will not act unless many others do so as well. Because thresholds are situation-specific, two groups may be identical in composition but still experience distinct outcomes due to the particular process of aggregation. As such, collective results do not necessarily offer an accurate reflection of what individuals would do in every situation (Granovetter 1978).

Many of these ideas resonate with the original formulations of Kanter and Dahlerup, who point to diversity among women and the importance of individuals who resolve to act on behalf of women as a group.

Adapting them, we argue for distinguishing between “critical actors” and “critical mass” in order to identify the concrete representatives—not vague imperatives of “sex” or “gender”—who put in motion individual and collective campaigns for women-friendly policy change. “Critical actors” are those who initiate policy proposals on their own, even when women form a small minority, and embolden others to take steps to promote policies for women, regardless of the proportion of female representatives. Indeed, they may not even be women; in some situations, individual men may play a crucial role in advancing women’s policy concerns (Celis 2004; Tamerius 1995). Their common feature is their relatively low threshold for political action: Although they may hold attitudes similar to those of other representatives, they are much more motivated than others to initiate women-friendly policy reforms (Childs and Withey 2006). Although they may operate alone, they may also stimulate others to act, setting in motion a momentum for policy change, or alternatively, provoking a backlash among those opposed to fundamental reform. As such, their shape and impact are not absolute, as smaller numbers of women may join together in legislative caucuses to promote common goals with great success, while larger numbers may enhance the opportunity for critical acts but may also foil their effects.

## Conclusion

For at least two decades, the concept of critical mass has provided optimism to scholars, activists, and politicians interested in promoting both the descriptive and substantive representation of women. In the eyes of most, the entry of a few women to political office has not yet resulted in the widespread feminization of politics because there are simply not enough of them to “make a difference.” The solution, therefore, has been to argue for measures to achieve a “critical mass” of women who could, in turn, press for women-friendly policy change. As these claims have grown increasingly more popular in the policy world, however, a growing amount of scholarly research has cast their validity into doubt.

Given these opposing pulls, should feminists give up on critical mass? We think both yes and no. On the one hand, we believe that critical mass theory should be firmly discarded: Expecting an automatic change once women attain a certain proportion of seats is theoretically dubious and, perhaps even more seriously, undermines the case for women’s increased presence if existing female politicians appear to be failing women as a group. On the other hand, we recognize that the concept of critical

mass has proven extremely useful in making concrete gains in the “real world,” as it insists that a few token individuals are not sufficient for provoking large-scale policy change. To reconcile these theoretical and practical concerns, we propose 1) opening up the research question to explore the various actors, strategies, and outcomes consistent with the substantive representation of women across space and over time, and 2) focusing on “critical actors” and their role in pursuing policy change, either alone or together with others, as a more precise theoretical and practical strategy for understanding which kinds of women—and men—are most likely to represent women’s concerns in political office.

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